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Review of Andrea Korda, *Printing and Painting the News in Victorian London: The Graphic and Social Realism, 1869–1891* (2015)

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Reviews

Andrea Korda, *Printing and Painting the News in Victorian London: The Graphic and Social Realism, 1869–1891* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015). 205 pp. ISBN 978-1-4724-3298-8

In her book *Printing and Painting the News in Victorian London* (2015) Andrea Korda examines the work of three painters — Frank Holl, Luke Fildes, and Hubert Herkomer — to answer a longstanding question: what happened to the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction? The three ‘social realist’ painters — not to be confused with the ‘socialist realism’ of the Soviet Union — make fine case studies because they were closely tied to the Royal Academy, but also worked as illustrators for William Luson Thomas’s the *Graphic*, a successful illustrated journal that distributed mechanically reproduced illustrations of news events on a massive scale. Besides these obvious connections, Korda contends that the three artists shared a unique response to the age of mechanical reproduction:

Rather than spurning mechanical reproductions as the products of commerce and industry, [...] they adopted the strategies of a commercial and mechanical mass culture as a means of revitalizing high art, looking specifically to the new medium of the illustrated newspaper as their model.¹

It is precisely this point — the appropriation of mass-culture by the three painters in order to revitalize high art — that makes Korda’s book so interesting. She positions their work as a counter-narrative to the

dichotomy, famously posited by Clement Greenberg in his *Art and Culture* (1989), between the ‘modern’ image and the ‘modernist’ artwork: the first being an easily digestible and commercialised visual opiate for the people, while the latter necessarily incites viewers to question the status quo.² Theorists of visual culture such as Jonathan Crary,³ have broadened this opposition by claiming that modernist artists invite spectators to see the world in a new light, while objective modern image makers, like the scientist, the doctor, and the photographer, press towards an increasing standardization and regulation of the observer.

Korda argues that the work of Holl, Fildes, and Herkomer reveals important aspects of modern life — ‘tells us something about modernity’⁴ — without intentionally challenging its commercialized visual culture. She uses a media-archaeological approach, based on the work of Michel Foucault, to ‘excavate’ the logic of social realism. Social realism ‘offered an alternative response to the conditions of modernity, one that engaged with both modern problems and modern media, but that has since been purged from teleological histories of modern art’.⁵

In order to demonstrate her central thesis, Korda compares the visual regimes of the two most famous British illustrated newspapers: the *Illustrated London News* and the *Graphic*. Building on the work

1 Andrea Korda, *Printing and Painting the News in Victorian London: The Graphic and Social Realism, 1869–1891* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p. 2.

2 Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989).

3 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

4 Korda, p. 7.

5 Korda, p. 11.

of media historian Jean Chalaby,⁶ who describes the shift from a partisan press financed by political factions in the early nineteenth century, to a commercialized and 'objective' press financed by advertisements, Korda claims that the regime of the *Illustrated London News* can be characterized by its accessibility, objectivity, and instant legibility. In other words: by its commercialized nature. The images of William Luson Thomas's *Graphic*, on the other hand, encouraged a 'renewed sense of immediacy', inviting readers not only to see an event but also to experience it through the image.⁷

The social realism of Korda's painters developed in relation to the visual regime of the *Graphic*. According to the author, this regime can almost be viewed as modernist, because of its challenging and de-regulatory nature. In order to substantiate her point, she describes Thomas and his 'fellow workmen' as true modernist artists, who in starting the *Graphic* 'were motivated by a dedication to their art and their labour, not by profit'.⁸ Conversely, Herbert Ingram, the founder of the *Illustrated London News*, is portrayed as a money-hungry capitalist, without any interest in the artistic value of his paper, or the human value of his artists. These sharply drawn differences between the motivation of Ingram and Thomas are essential to Korda's argument: in the classic dichotomy, modern image-makers reinforce commercialized society, while modernist artists critique it.

It is well accepted among Victorian periodical scholars that the *Graphic* paid more attention to the quality of its illustrations than the *Illustrated London News*. However, it is the question what motivated this: artistic inclination, commercial gain, or maybe both? To answer this somewhat rhetorical question: Thomas was an inspired artist who saw an interesting niche for a high-quality magazine that targeted the upper-regions of the British public (the *Graphic* was

priced at six pence, while the *Illustrated London News* sold for five pence). The success of the *Graphic*, selling around 70,000 copies in 1870, attests to both his artistic sensibility and his business sense.

To conclude: *Printing and Painting the News in Victorian London* sheds a new and well-deserved light on the artistic value of the work of Holl, Fildes, and Herkomer and the illustrations of the *Graphic*, while rightly trying to excavate both the medium of the illustrated newspaper and the style of social realism from their graves in teleological accounts of (art) history. However, Korda is less successful in untying the theoretical knot between modern images and modernist works of art. Instead, she seems to mainly redraw the borders between the two categories, claiming artistic avant-gardism for the *Graphic*, while dismissing the commercialized *Illustrated London News*. The frequently cited admiration of Vincent van Gogh for the *Graphic*, who as the modernist painter par excellence is made to serve as its expert witness, illustrates this point. The taste of the famous painter was, however, broader than Korda suggests: he was also a fervent admirer of many illustrations in the 'commercialized' *Illustrated London News*.

In the end the reader is left wondering if the opposition between modern image-makers and modernist artists is useful in explaining the significance of the work of Holl, Fildes, and Herkomer and influential publications like the *Graphic* and *Illustrated London News*, which can easily be characterized as being part of both trends. Maybe it is precisely the ambivalence of the artists and these kinds of enterprises that tells us something about modernity; the fact that they thrived at a point where mass-culture and artistic sensibility met in the middle.

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6 Jean K. Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

7 Korda, p. 174.

7 Korda, p. 53.